

5th World Conference on Educational Sciences - WCES 2013**“School means nothing to me”. Vocationalism and school disaffiliation in Education and Training Courses in Portugal**

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Abstract

Education and Training Courses for young people have assumed great relevance in the Portuguese education system. Aimed at fighting school failure and dropout these courses fall within the compensatory education framework policies. Based on interviews, an analysis of the students attending Education and Training Courses, school pathways, experiences and representations on how this form of provision was achieved. Data collected pointed to a general feeling of disaffiliation towards school, seen as a necessary evil, as well as the understanding of Education and Training Courses as the last chance to conclude the 9th year of basic education.

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Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of Academic World Education and Research Center.

Keywords: Education and Training Courses, vocationalism; school disaffiliation, school failure and dropout

1. Introduction

Education and Training Courses are a positive discrimination measure to combat school failure and dropout allowing insertion into active life. Their target audience is young people aged between 15 and 18 years old, with trajectories of failure, at risk of dropping out or who have left school without having completed the 9th grade. To these attributes defined by law, others are added, via an unofficial route which contributes to declassify this population: its working class origin, low parental educational attainment, indiscipline, lack of motivation and the families' disinvestment. Although studies on this educational offer underline the positive aspects of this modality for some students and teachers - reconciliation with the school, the will to continue studying, pedagogical teamwork, pedagogical innovation – the social devaluation and stigmatization which they are both subject to is notorious. Students refer to negative representations that they are subject to, the disinvestment of some teachers, the uselessness of an education that seems to lead to a dead end. Teachers emphasize the emotional exhaustion, lack of preparation to deal with this kind of audience, facilitation... (Alves, Marques, Canário, & Cavaco, 2012).

From biographical interviews conducted on students who are taking these courses we aim to analyze their school careers, the representations on the school and on the Education and Training Courses; reasons for attending these courses and the relationship they establish with knowledge. Education and Training Courses are a positive discrimination measure to combat school failure and dropout allowing insertion into active life. Their target

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2. Certainty, uncertainty and promises – mutations in school

The “school crisis” has become since the late 60's a recurring expression that expresses a general feeling of dissatisfaction towards the school. Sheltering under its aegis very diverse and even contradictory dissatisfactions, this expression implies the existence of a single model school whose operating conditions would have been degraded to democratize access to education. Thus, the term “school crisis” would fundamentally designate a set of malfunctions within the school, to which could be given an answer of a technical nature that would most likely return the educational institution all its lost power (Canário, Alves & Rolo, 2001). However, throughout the 20th century we could watch the authentic changes in the school that led to a crisis that, far from being qualified as a technical crisis is primarily assumed as a pedagogical and political crisis. In this perspective, discussing the “school crisis” does not refer to an efficiency problem but rather to the school's loss of legitimacy and meaning.

The mutations suffered by the school throughout the twentieth century can be summarized in a formula according to which the school moved from a certainty context to a context of promises, standing today in a context of uncertainty (Canário, Alves & Rolo, 2001). This formula allows us to report the trajectory, albeit with unique characteristics, held in Portugal, in such a contradictory and accelerated manner throughout the last forty years. The school of certainty corresponds to the school from the first half of the twentieth century, which could function as an institution that, from a stable set of values that were immanent, 'manufactured' conforming citizens to a predetermined civic model. At that time it corresponded to the portrait that Durkheim (1985) traced, while promoting social integration through methodical socialization of the younger generations. Despite its admittedly selective and elitist character, the school did not appear committed to producing social injustice, favoring some paths of upward social mobility for the children of the working class based on merit. Via educational stratified and socially selective pathways, school as an institution fulfilled its function of creating citizens and ensuring their distribution throughout the available social positions according to their social background.

The period of the “thirty glorious” years brands, through the simultaneous growth of supply (public policy) and demand (“rush to school”), the transition from an elitist school to a school for the masses, the process started, timidly, in Portugal in the late 60's (Grácio, 1986) and only accelerated with the overthrow of the dictatorial regime in 1974. The expansion of school systems and democratization of access are associated to a positive outlook that marks the transition from a school of certainty to school of promises: a promise of development, a promise of social mobility, a promise of greater equality and social justice.

The onset of a recession lasting from the mid 70's, which succeeded the “Fordism virtuous circle” (that Portuguese society did not get to truly know) leads to, as far as the school is concerned, euphoria befalls disenchantment. Paradoxically, the democratization of access to school committed to the production of social inequalities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970) without, at the same time, allowing it to fulfill its impossible promises (Boudon, 1973). Not being able to continue to present itself as a fair institution in an unfair world (Dubet, 1999), the school is bound to raise the levels of its audience's frustration and accentuating a sense of meaninglessness as far as pedagogical work is concerned both by students (Charlot, 1997) and the teachers (Canário, 2005).

It is the transition from an 'optimistic' demand to a 'disenchanted' demand (Grácio, 1986) that marks the start of the school in the early 80's, a period of uncertainty. The rarity of jobs then goes on to linking itself with the inflation of diplomas, making them simultaneously less profitable and more necessary than ever. This situation, which is the origin of the “second school explosion” (Derouet, 2002), allows us to understand why all statistical indicators witnessed widespread access to increasingly longer educational pathways and at the same time one can see, an ever more increasing sensitivity to the phenomena of “relative exclusion” in public schools (Dubet, 1996). The school of uncertainty accompanies a process of both loss of internal and external consistency.

Foreign because the school corresponds to an institution and a form of organization that were created for a world that no longer exists - the industrial society - based on economic liberalism and political reference to the nation as a state. Internal insofar as maintaining organizational arrangements designed to deal with the homogeneous public

which is now completely obsolete and inadequate in responding to the diversity of students, the need to individualize the educational process, academic failure and school dropout.

The positive educational discrimination measures arise in a context of uncertainty, as a way to overcome the effects produced by the meritocratic principle of equal access opportunities, but not success. The competition losers, where not all are playing with the same weapons, then become the public of these educational measures that, in Portugal, have taken a strong palliative and vocationalist penchant. Education Training Courses are, in fact, the best example of this type of measures. Its palliative character is due to the fact that they are designed to solve failure and dropout problems proved by the meritocratic school, allowing it to remain unchanged in its operation. The vocationalist character resulting from these courses via career opportunities, which they provide are an expression of the subordination of education catering to the economy's needs (Alves, Marques, Canário, & Cavaco, 2012).

3. Methodological approach

The methodological choice fell on a qualitative and interpretative approach having seven biographical interviews to students been held in the 2011-2012 school year where they attended Education and Training Courses in a public school within the Lisbon metropolitan area. The biographical interview, as conceptualized and used by Demazière and Dubar (1997, 1999) affiliates itself consequence of its affiliation to the German Comprehensive Sociology paradigm whose precursors are Simmel and Weber and recognizes the importance assigned to the social actors and their subjectivity on the production of knowledge on the social. The biographical interview gives thus a central role to the subject and his epistemological subjectivity, as advocated by Finger (1989), and is part of what has been dubbed by a return of the social actor. The interviews are not “stories of practice” in order to understand the macro social mechanisms as proposed by Bertaux (1997), nor are they life stories, such as those used by the Chicago School (Finger, 1989, Roberts, 2002). They are stories about a life plan - the school plan - in order to know these students “schooling worlds”.

Once transcribed, the interviews were subject to thematic content analysis (Bardin, 2009) from the following categories: educational background; representations on the school and on the Education and Training Courses; reasons to attend Education and Training and Courses and students' relationship with knowledge.

The young people interviewed shared some common features: they all volunteered to tell their “school stories”; everyone attended the 9th grade; everyone failed at least once during their school career.

4. School pathways in abeyance – from school disaffiliation to the last chance for reconciliation with school

4.1. *‘I failed. Whose fault is it?’ Failure as individual responsibility.*

School failure is a common trajectory feature among the students interviewed. With the exception of Nicholas and Carrie who failed only once, all the others accumulated two or more fails. James and Peter failed twice, Debra and Mary three times. Rita with four failures describes her educational background in the following terms: *“Flunked, passed, flunked, passed, it was like that.”*

The reasons given for the failures reflect adherence to the meritocracy equal opportunity model (Dubet, 2004), therefore the respondents assuming their failure as an exclusively individual responsibility. Out of all of them, James is the one who best expresses agreement with the meritocratic ideology and conception of justice that is inherent: *“Sometimes students have a habit of blaming teachers for flunking out, I never I failed because of the teachers, I failed because I didn't give a dam about school”*.

With the exception of Nicholas who failed because he was ill, all others attribute their failures to the disinvestment in school, expressed in the refusal to attend classes:

“I got sick of it ... I was always missing classes. (...) Got lazy, didn't feel like getting up to go to school so I didn't go” (Rita); *“I started to miss a lot, went to school but didn't go to school, I hung around talking to other friends who were also skiving, most times I didn't even leave the school grounds”* (Debra); *“I bunked off a lot. At first I used to*

go to class. Then the teachers started to bug me and I didn't go to school or just went when my mother caught me" (Carrie).

But the individualization process of their school failures is further reinforced through the unaccountability of the teaching staff. These young people are assumed as the ones to blame for their failures, but they don't attribute it to a deficit in their cognitive abilities. They failed because they missed school, despite teachers' efforts: *"Teachers urged me on, gave me advice ... I pretended that I heard them but never took any notice"* (James); *"Sometimes it was the teachers who took me to classes and I went, but it was against my will"* (Debra); *"I was always missing classes and the teachers were always calling and sending letters, you know, they were always writing. Then my mother would go to school and they would say it was such a pity I didn't go to school, I had a lot of promise and that I had to go to school otherwise I'd never do the 9th grade. I'd go for a few days and then wouldn't go any more"* (Rita).

4.2. *A school of all, but only for a few – Representations about the school and its relationship with knowledge*

Absenteeism emerges in the interviews, as the main reason for their failure at school. However it is the manifestation of a more complex process of school disaffiliation. Making the analogy with the disaffiliation concept proposed by Castel (1999), we consider school disaffiliation to be the symbolic exclusion from schools through the loss of meaning of school work and schooling. These young people were physically present, enrolled, established relationships with colleagues and befriended some teachers, but "got fed up" and gave up. Some were missing classes; others like Peter *"sat there staring at the window or pretending not to be there just killing time"*.

Debra lost interest – *"I think I ended up losing interest, as I couldn't do things well, I went off school"* - James and Rita didn't really care, didn't study, didn't do the homework, they did nothing.

The stories of these young students divulge several representations on school and schooling, which are associated with different forms of mobilization towards the school and school work (Charlot, 1997). None of these young people referred to school as a learning space for meaningful knowledge. James develops an argument that seeks to disqualify the school on behalf of true learning acquired outside the school context, those being really important:

"Everything I know that is important for my life, I learnt out there. In school we also learn a lot but out there where I live, it's not worth it, you know what I mean? Where I live we have to get by, learn to do something to earn cash. What do you learn in school? What for? I've always had to find a way to get my stuff, if I was just a school boy what would I do? For example, I know how to put a computer together, take it apart and fix it. You think I learnt that in school? Nope. It was with a friend I do some work with and I get some cash. School is good but for those who have everything. I have to get by ..." (James).

In the discourse of these young people, school appears as a space of boredom, humiliation and discrimination. Some tell us that school is as a place of boredom where one is closed in the same room, listening to the same things and putting up with the same teachers. Others refer to it as a humiliation space where they were victims and their classmates and teachers are the symbolic aggressors. Peer and teacher mocking, the invisibility that were subjected to by teachers, being assigned labels such as ignorant, stupid ... all contributing to the school being, for some of these young people, a place of profound suffering and hostility. School is a place of discrimination resulting in some young people identifying it as the behaviors and teachers' attitudes towards good students: *"teachers always like good students. Sometimes in class it looks like there is no one else"* (James); *"I think there are teachers who only like good students. They only like the students who always know everything, do everything and have good grades"* (Carrie).

4.3. *Education and Training Courses – the last chance for reconciliation with school?*

The Education and Training Courses arise in these youths schooling history as the last chance to complete the 9th grade, which until 2011/2012 school year corresponded to the compulsory schooling. For these students, "fed up" and tired of mainstream education, the dilemma was to give up once and for all, assuming their condition unconditionally as beaten or making one last attempt, the last attempt, as Charlot (2002) states, to establish a symbolic relationship with school:

"I was tired of school, didn't want to go back to the 9th grade again it was because of this that I came to the course. Didn't want to go back to the 9th grade again, I knew I'd flunk again" (Peter); *"The most important thing was to change, not having to go back to the 8th grade again"* (Rita); *"I was very discouraged in the normal course,*

got to the point that I thought wasn't going to make it, because I didn't have the grades needed to pass and I had to solve it, especially since my parents were already losing patience with me" (Debra).

Since the completion of the 9th grade is the goal to be achieved, the professional outputs which are provided by the courses are a missing theme in the stories that they tell. No one enrolls in the course with a view to a subsequent qualified transition to the labor market. The course which these young people will attend is for them, an irrelevant detail. As Nicholas said, *"it was just to the 9th grade, the course made no difference"*. The "choice" of course is based on supply and on school information supplied by colleagues who followed this same route.

Sharing an instrumental rationality geared to obtain school certification; these young people were referred to an offer of education and training that enables them to obtain a certificate without undertaking the national exams in the 9th grade, perceived as an insurmountable barrier. It is not so surprising that *fleeing exams* emerges as the main reason to attend the Education and Training Courses: *"I only chose the course because of the exams"* (Mary); *"As soon as I found out that I didn't need to do exams, I came to the course"* (James); *"I came do I didn't have to take the exam"* (Nicholas).

Escaping exams is associated with the perception of a less demanding curriculum that allows reversing the trajectories of failure: *"It's easier, that was the idea I had and it's true, you can't miss a lot, and that was difficult for me, but as it is easier, I can take it well"* (Rita); *"I realized, or at least that's what I found out, it was easier, I had no problems with the subjects"* (Carrie).

Attending the Education and Training Courses appears to have contributed to these students in establishing a new relationship with education and knowledge, contrary to the process of school disaffiliation in which they were involved. The return of these young people to school in the symbolic sense is the result of the combined effect of a wide range of factors. First to come is the curriculum design of these courses contributing to these students to consider this education and training provision an easier one which is within the scope of their capabilities: *"You can do this easy, you can't compare it to the 9th grade which I failed"* (James); *"This is simpler and it isn't tiring. There are also those subjects that give you more work, there are teachers who ask for more things but it is not so difficult. It's simpler ..."* (Rita).

Secondly comes the teaching strategies used, based more on learning by doing than in the traditional teaching method dominated by transmission of knowledge, memorization and assessment and Carrie describes it as the following: *"I have to do things but it is easier, how can I explain it ... we do different things, look at these things that are here in the room and the others that are in the library we were the ones who did them and I like that. I think I have the knack to do cool stuff. Even in other subjects there isn't that pressure, assignments and more assignments and more tests and more tests"* (Carrie).

The final factor focuses on the pedagogical relationship built on creating a more conducive environment for learning that allows the building of a more positive image of themselves as students: *"teachers, most of them are more understanding, they are not always on top us, telling us that this way we're just not going to make it, that if we don't work hard we're not going to finish, they don't put you down so much"* (Debra); *"Now I feel that I'm better, I'm no longer afraid to do badly, to say things that are wrong, reading, answering. I think I'm more comfortable, I lost my fear of doing things wrong, if you it wrong, you do it again"* (Mary).

5. Final remarks

The Educaiont and Training Courses arise from the context of a set of positive discrimination measures to combat school failure and drop out as well as to facilitate the transition to work. The double valence of these courses reflects the tension between an orientation that aims to reduce inequalities in school and in a palliative perspective that reinforces a vocationalist tendency within the Portuguese education system.

The Education and Training Courses were for the interviewed students, a turning point in their school careers. Their stories give us school two distinct periods. One marked by disaffiliation and where the school emerges as a place of boredom, humiliation and discrimination; another that matches the Education and Training Courses attendance and it features a "reconciliation" with the schooling world. This "reconciliation" is the result of a less

demanding curriculum, the adoption of active learning teaching methodologies and the establishment of pedagogical relationships that alter the devalued image that students have built about themselves.

These young students' stories bring to light the contradictions that a meritocratic school under the aegis of principle of equal opportunities necessarily produces losers as Dubet (2004) advocates. Attracted to a competition which they find themselves excluded from, these youngsters become the target of a palliative measure with vocationalist orientation that if one part has positive effects on school disaffiliation, on the other hand it does not alter the disadvantage place that they occupy within the meritocratic competition space which is school.

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